



**“It is your character, and your character alone, that will make your life happy or unhappy.”**

The above quote comes from the Introduction of Senator John McCain and Mark Salter’s newest best-selling work, *Character is Destiny*. This is a book of stories that, according to the back cover, “will stir the hearts of young and old alike and help prepare us for the hard work of choosing our destinies.” Curiously, the opening sentence of the book reads: “I don’t believe in destiny” and proceeds to illustrate - through stories of well known and some lesser known historical figures – how destiny is really about the choices we make in our lives.

When looked at this way, *Character is Destiny* is a fairly compelling work. The opening section of the book is entitled Honor and includes such historical figures as Sir Thomas More (representing the virtue of *honesty*), who lost his head because he wouldn’t recognize King Henry VIII as the leader of the English Church; Joan of Arc (representing *authenticity*), who was burned at the stake for being a witch; and Viktor Frankl (representing *dignity*), a Jewish psychiatrist who chose to remain with his family in Vienna during the German occupation rather than leave for America while he still could. (Frankl lived through Auschwitz to learn that his entire family had been slaughtered by the Nazis.)

*Character is Destiny* a worthwhile read because it presents a unified vision of character and its many virtues. It is especially interesting to see the way McCain and Salter portray a historical figure in a way that attempts to reflect that virtue. The aforementioned chapter on Frankl is especially effective because it is clear from his life’s story that his *dignity* was the defining character trait of his personality.

Some of the best chapters in the book are those that deal with “lesser-known heroes,” contemporary figures like Oseola McCarty (representing *generosity*), who gave away her life savings (over \$150,000) that she had earned doing other people’s laundry to set up minority scholarships at the University of Southern Mississippi; Pat Tillman (representing *citizenship*), who first gave up a promising professional football career and then ultimately his life to be on the front lines of America’s War on Terror; or Mother Antonia, a former Beverly Hills housewife who became a nun and went to work helping counsel prisoners in some of Mexico’s worst prisons.

Unlike the many of the chapters dealing with historical figures from centuries past—figures whose life stories have been told more thoroughly and convincingly by other historians and biographers—the contemporary figures remind us that even in today’s fast-paced and self-centered society, there are those among us willing to make difficult choices that make the world a better place.

The award for the very best chapters, though, would go to those in which McCain actually interjects himself into the stories themselves. For example, the chapter about Romeo Dallaire (representing *righteousness*) opens with the following confession: “It was my fault, too, like most of my colleagues in Congress, like the president of the United States, like most Americans, and, tragically, like most of the world. I thought the problems of one small African country were not my responsibility” (49). The “small African country” McCain is referring to is, of course, Rwanda, and the “problem” was the 1995 genocide of over 800,000 Rwandans in a span of 100 days. Because McCain acknowledges his own oversight in failing to support the Clinton Administration’s action in this matter, he becomes a more sympathetic narrator of Dallaire’s story.

The story of Viktor Frankl’s dignity in the face the Nazi’s “Final Solution” is made even more powerful when McCain speaks of the impact Frankl’s example had on him during his own time as a five-year POW:

“It is my good fortune to have had experiences in my life that allow me to attest with some authority to the truth of Vikto Frankl’s understanding of dignity. I have not suffered as he suffered. But I lost my liberty for a time, and, in one instance, when I was forced to something I thought had dishonored me and my family, I feared I had lost everything of value to me, and that my life had lost its purpose. Then, by the example of other, better men, I realized that I still had a choice. I could choose to accept my misfortune and make it count for something. I could choose to acknowledge my weaknesses, and to try again to transcend them, and reclaim my dignity. Nothing in my life, before or after, has ever had more meaning, and I count myself privileged for the experience.” (36)

Moments like this one remind us that the author of *Character is Destiny* is himself a person worthy of a chapter in his own book, and given the varied life experiences he has had, the chapter on John McCain would likely be one of the most fascinating.

Leaders – regardless of their field – can benefit from many of the book’s chapters and the messages contained within. For example, included in *Character is Destiny* are many accounts about political figures—four U.S. Presidents (Washington, Lincoln, T. Roosevelt, and Eisenhower), a British Queen (Elizabeth I) and Prime Minister (Churchill), an Indian President (Ghandi), a civil rights leader (King), a religious leader (Winthrop), and others whose life stories, albeit abbreviated, relay powerful examples of leadership. Exploring the different leadership styles of these men – and woman – as they navigated their countries through difficult and challenging times would be a worthwhile journey for all readers who are interested in cultivating their character and developing their leadership skills. Some of the stories may even stay with you long after the book has been tucked away on a book shelf.